

## Chapter 12

# In Search of the Roots of *Stregheria*

## Preliminary Observations on the History of a Reclaimed Tradition

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This chapter is a preliminary exploration of the links between three layers of vernacular religion and the experiences underlying them: Italian vernacular religion and healing, Italian American versions of these customs, and *Stregheria*, or Italian American revival Witchcraft,<sup>1</sup> a Neo-Pagan religion practiced by second-, third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans seeking new ways to connect with spirituality and construct ethnic identity. I argue that Italian vernacular religion was linked to a number of geographic, economic, religious, and social factors that were particular to the regions and towns in which it developed, but also partook of a broader cosmology that I am calling “the enchanted worldview.” In this chapter, I will outline some of the parameters of this worldview and sketch its particulars, especially in the areas of vernacular healing, magic, and witchcraft. I also propose that American scholars reconsider historical approaches to the study of tradition, especially when these can shed light on how traditions change over time to incorporate elements from elite and ecclesiastical cultures. This is the first step of a much broader study in which I hope to examine each of these aspects of Italian vernacular culture in greater detail. It grows out of my previous research on Italian religious festivals, Italian American ethnicity, and the reclamation of European folklore by contemporary Pagan religions.

I first became interested in this subject as a result of reader response to my critique of Italian American Neo-Pagan foundation legends, particularly the work of

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Some material in this chapter appeared previously in “Italian Cunning Craft: some preliminary observations,” *Journal for the Academic Study of Magic* 5 (2008):103–34.

Raven Grimassi, the architect of Stregheria, an Italian American variant of modern Pagan Witchcraft based on nineteenth-century folklorist Charles Leland's *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1899). Leland claimed to have discovered a sect of Tuscan witches who worshipped the goddess Diana and her brother or lover Lucifer and used magic to resist the oppression of greedy landowners. Many nonacademic readers disagreed with my portrayal of these as "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), claiming instead to have inherited an authentic pre-Christian religious practice from their Italian grandmothers. Rather than ignoring or dismissing their claims, I asked my critics for additional details about the practices they remembered from their relatives. I was intrigued by their answers, as they recalled beliefs, customs, and narratives I knew from my study of Italian folklore. Drawing from the historical work of Carlo Ginzburg (1989) and Gustav Henningsen (1990), both of whom described medieval trial records detailing legendary night flights associated with music, feasting, and magical healing, I hypothesized that vernacular healing practices, with their mixture of Roman Catholicism and popular magic, might provide a link between Italian traditions and those being recast as ancient pagan practice by the new Pagans. I was particularly interested in the spiritual and mystical experiences that Italian American immigrants brought with them to North America and the ways they informed the imagination of reclamationists. Historians have recently focused attention on the strong mystical, imaginative components of vernacular healing, or cunning craft, in other parts of Europe (Pócs 1999; Davies 2003; Wilby 2005). By "imaginative," I mean having to do with what anthropologist Michele Stephen calls the "autonomous imagination," a part of the human imagination that operates without the individual's conscious control, freely mixing cultural and religious material with more personal elements (Stephen 1989, 42). The autonomous imagination is responsible for experiences that emerge through visions, dreams, trances, spirit possession, and hypnosis. More than simply a wish-fulfillment mechanism, it is part of the way the human mind creatively processes information, and it plays a central role in creating cultural and individual religious landscapes (Stephen 1989, 44). If Italian cunning craft is similar to other European cunning traditions, and preliminary comparisons suggest many parallels, I suggest that it is these imaginative components that are now being reinterpreted as survivals of pre-Christian religions and reclaimed by New Age practitioners. My intuition is that individuals who represent themselves as bearers of ancient pagan religions may in fact have grown up with bits and pieces of Italian vernacular mysticism and magic preserved in an immigrant context. For them, Stregheria and other forms of reclamation represent important ways to make sense of and recontextualize their heritage of vernacular magic.

In the eyes of New Agers, the rich Italian American spiritual tradition, so different from that of other North American Catholics in its focus on saints, the cult of the Virgin Mary, and complex material culture of festivals, altars, and icons, is understood as a Christianized version of an ancient goddess religion that was once diffused throughout the Mediterranean. In this pre-Christian religion, as it is imagined by reclamationists, the world was permeated by enchantment. Humans did not see themselves as separate from nature and the divine. Goddesses were worshipped as well as gods; in fact, the feminine form of the divine was usually given prominence,

often in the form of a mother goddess. Women had important liturgical roles as priestesses, but also as shamans and healers who communicated directly with the spiritual world. In these recontextualizations, Italy and Italian identity are projected millennia beyond the formation of the present-day Italian state in 1861. Like other exemplars of the New Age movement, reclamationists mine folklore for symbols that can be used for individual development and empowerment, and there is an emphasis on healing a world that has torn asunder the bonds between nature, the individual, and the sacred. Some of my earlier work examined this process in the works of Raven Grimassi, an Italian American writer and the architect of Stregheria, or Italian American revival Witchcraft (Grimassi 1995, 1999, 2000). Grimassi (a pen name), the son of an Italian mother and an American father who met during the allied occupation of Italy during World War II, defines witches as practitioners of ancient pagan religions who suffered persecutions by those determined to wipe out their spirituality during medieval and early modern times. Their practices survived in secrecy, and Grimassi claims to come from a family whose occult practices preserved these traditions. His works attempt to make the Old Religion accessible to contemporary Pagan practitioners. Except for a few individual charms, Stregheria bears little resemblance to vernacular religious practices that have been documented by Italian ethnographers. Instead, it parallels other forms of Neo-Pagan Witchcraft in structure and practice, substituting Italian glosses for deities, feasts, and spirits. Its principal deities are Diana (also known as Tana and Fana) and her consort, called Dianus (Tanus, Faunus; Grimassi 2000, 266). The central prophet in Stregheria is Aradia, a legendary character drawn from the writings of nineteenth-century amateur folklorist Charles Leland, loosely based on the New Testament character of Herodias as reworked in medieval Christian legends (Leland 1990 [1899]). Leland identified her as the daughter of the goddess Diana, sent to earth in the fourteenth century to teach Italian peasants to resist political oppression through magic. Elaborating on Leland, Grimassi deepens her biography, giving her the surname “di Toscano” and a birthplace in Tuscany. Grimassi’s Aradia is herself engaged in reclamation, reviving and reinterpreting the religion of the ancient Etruscan peoples in order to empower fourteenth-century peasants. After spreading her gospel throughout the region, Aradia herself disappears, but her twelve followers travel through Italy to further diffuse her teachings. Grimassi presents himself as the heir to this magical tradition, which, according to him, has been handed down in certain Italian families for seven hundred years.

In some of my earlier work, my principal concern was to contextualize this creation as reclamation: a modern historical phenomenon that seeks to revive and revalue some Italian vernacular religious practices stigmatized by the dominant culture when Italians immigrated to North America (see Magliocco 2002, 2005, 2006). Distinguishing between Italian vernacular magic and its reclaimed forms is meant not to delegitimize the latter but to draw attention to reclamation itself as an integral part of the process of tradition. The reclamation of Italian American goddess-centered spirituality is most popular among middle-class, second- and third-generation Italian Americans, especially women disaffected with traditional forms of ethnic identity rooted in neighborhood, church, and family-based organizations. It allows adherents to feel a sense of belonging to an ethnic community without some of

the constraints associated with older ethnic structures, such as the limitations of Catholic morality and the restrictions of belonging to a small community in which one's actions are subject to popular censure. At the same time, it revalues some of the more ecstatic, imaginative, and mystical components of Italian spirituality that have long been considered signs of superstition and backwardness by both Italian high culture and mainstream North American culture. These elements are stripped of their Catholic superstructure and reinterpreted as the vestiges of ancient religion, resistant to the oppression of church and state.

If we are to better understand some of the impulses behind reclamation, it is important to understand the actual religious and spiritual experiences and beliefs that Italian immigrants brought with them to North America and the ways these have now been understood by reclamationists. What are the building blocks of contemporary spiritual movements such as *Stregheria*? One way to understand them is to turn to evidence provided by historians—religious and otherwise—regarding the practices of Italian Americans in the early years following immigration. The works of Phyllis Williams (1938), Rudolph Vecoli (1969, 1977), and Robert Orsi (1985) are fundamental in understanding both the social context and the religious practice of Italian Americans from about 1900 to the mid-twentieth century. In order to understand the roots of these traditions, however, it is necessary to go beyond the historical records of Italian immigrants in the New World. Magicoreligious traditions in North America were influenced by a constellation of factors, including the negative judgment given them by the surrounding Protestant culture and the Irish-dominated American Catholic Church. But perhaps the largest factor to affect these traditions was their decontextualization from the Italian agro-pastoral peasant to an urban diasporic context. Once their adherents were stripped of their relationship to geography, economy, and social structure, many features of these belief systems simply crumbled, while others evolved in new directions. In order to better comprehend both beliefs and experiences and the longing for them represented by reclamation movements, I wish to recontextualize them within a broader cultural, historical, and social framework.

One of my contentions, based on my earlier fieldwork in Sardinia, as well as on the work of other Italian ethnologists, is that magicoreligious traditions were deeply embedded in everyday life. They could be found in the cycle of rituals and celebrations connected to the individual life cycle, the agro-pastoral year cycle, and the Roman Catholic liturgical cycle (Grimaldi 1993; Staro 2005, n.d.); in local songs and musical traditions (De Martino 2005 [1961]; Del Giudice 2005; Staro 2005; Magrini 2003); and in the most ordinary aspects of day-to-day life (Wilson 2000). Italian peasant lifeways and religiosity are built on a magical worldview that exists throughout the whole peninsula and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia. This worldview is difficult to systematize, and it varies in its particulars according to region and locality, as expressed through a variety of folklore genres, from festivals and celebrations to legends, folktales, and beliefs. It is always framed in terms of Roman Catholicism but may indeed contain elements of older belief systems. I believe that many individuals who represent themselves as carriers of “*La Vecchia Religione*,” to use Leland’s term, may in fact have grown up with bits and pieces of this worldview preserved in an immigrant context. For them, *Stregheria* and other forms of reclamation represent

important ways to make sense of and recontextualize their heritage of vernacular religion and magic. My task here is to trace these elements to the various regions of Italy from which immigrants hailed, to explain their meaning in its earlier contexts, and to address the question of their relationship to pre-Christian forms of practice.

The connection between folk customs and pagan practices was one of the principal concerns of early European folklorists, who saw peasant practices as “survivals” of an earlier stage of human development. While these interpretations became very influential in popular circles, mostly through the work of James G. Frazer, mid-twentieth-century folklorists and ethnologists rejected them in part because of their ethnocentric and colonialist biases. Inevitably, survivalist schemes stigmatized the practices of subdominant population groups, positing a unilinear development of human cultures unsupported by empirical evidence. Here, American and Italian lines of ethnological inquiry dramatically diverged. Following World War II, academic interests in the United States moved away from historical origins and toward the processes of tradition themselves. Folklorists began to feel that the search for origins, which had dominated the discipline during the nineteenth century, was pointless and instead concentrated on the microcontext of events: their relationship to exquisitely local economic, political, and social factors, and the way such factors shaped traditions. A number of historical studies in the late twentieth century, such as Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), demonstrated that many traditions that were assumed to be of ancient origin were actually of fairly recent derivation and were cobbled together for political reasons, often to enhance the power of the state or the identity of a particular social group. All of this made historicism hopelessly out of fashion. In contrast, Italian ethnology never entirely abandoned its historical perspective. While leaving behind survivalism, Italian ethnographers such as Ernesto De Martino and his followers turned their attention to the microhistorical context within which certain Italian peasant practices developed. De Martino’s study of *tarantismo*, a practice of dance, trance, and healing in the Salento, as well as Clara Gallini’s parallel treatment of the Sardinian practice of *argismo*, are typical examples of this genre, which examines folklore in its historical, literary, psycho-social, and ethnographic contexts (De Martino 2005 [1961]; Gallini 1988). This combination of disciplinary approaches, with careful attention to history, continues to be part of the academic paradigm in Italy.

Perhaps it is time for American folklorists to reconsider the question of the development of traditions from a historical, as well as a political, economic, and social, point of view. My reconsideration of Italian vernacular magical tradition is therefore not a search for pagan survivals, nor is it an attempt to do violence to the ways contemporary magical practitioners perceive themselves by attributing a pagan identity to practices they understand within a Christian context. Rather, it involves applying the historicism of De Martino to the issues I am considering here. Influenced by Marx and Gramsci, De Martino proposed ethnology as a historical science, examining southern Italian vernacular religion as a way of understanding how Christianity had imposed itself on indigenous belief systems, leading to syncretisms; and as a kind of archeology of custom, as a way to piece together a history of southern Italian culture from ancient times to the present (De Martino 2005 [1961], 7). For him, folklore was a historical document through

which to reconstruct the past—not as a survival but as “a document of a single history: that of the religious civilization in which it is a relic, or of the religious civilization in which it remains or is more or less profoundly remolded” (ibid.). This, then, is essentially a historical project, but one for which I am using ethnographic methodologies. My data come from my fieldwork in Sardinia, in the Emilian Apennine, and in Campania from the early 1980s to 2006; from the works of Italian ethnologists working mostly in the twentieth century; and from secondary historical sources from a variety of periods and regions. The risk in using such disparate sources is that culture is everywhere local, and it may indeed be misleading to compare elements from historically different times and places, especially in Italy, where any concept of a national culture is still fragile at best, even after over 150 years after unification. This can result in the same errors of the reclamationists, who pick and choose elements to compare without attention to history or local context. At the same time, to ignore parallels between data over a period of time and a geographic spread is also to betray the most fundamental principles of folkloristics. While folk traditions are everywhere localized and exist in a state of continual flux, they also demonstrate remarkable continuity over time and space. The roughly one hundred years between the great wave of Italian American immigration to North America and the present day is an eye-blink in the timeline of tradition; some of the traditions brought to North America by Italian immigrants still exist, in approximate or analogous form, in the regions of Italy from which they hailed. Because the process of immigration freezes culture at the moment of exodus, certain customs may have in fact survived longer in the immigrant periphery than in the national core: immigrant communities are often more conservative than the parent cultures from which they derive.

In the summer of 2005, I began to research this hypothesis in two key areas of Italy: Campania, the area of origin of Raven Grimassi's mother (and not coincidentally an area from which a large percentage of Italian Americans migrated) and the Emilian Apennine between Florence and Bologna, according to Charles Leland, the area of origin of Maddalena, his key informant and source for *Ara-dia*.<sup>2</sup> If modern Italian American Neo-Pagan traditions were based on folklore that had somehow eluded the attention of Italian scholars, it was in these areas that I would find their roots. I decided to focus first on vernacular healing traditions, as I knew that many of these were indeed passed on from one relative to another and required a kind of initiation. But I quickly found my research widening to include other Italian regions and geographic areas, because these phenomena are not discrete from one another but form a part of what I am calling, after Max Weber, the enchanted worldview.

### The Enchanted Worldview

In *Science as a Vocation* (1918–19), Max Weber argued that one of the central features of modernity is its distance from the magical, the spiritual, and the religious: “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’” (155). This disenchantment

involves not only the secularization of public and private spheres, but the distancing of the subject from the spiritual on both the personal and the social levels. The disenchanted world is mostly a feature of Western elite and bourgeois urbanites. I argue the sense of an interconnected universe filled with spirit and enchantment has persisted in many parts of the developed world, including rural Italy, until well into the twentieth century; in fact, it is still alive today.

A number of anthropologists have argued that all human societies recognize that multiple levels of reality coexist—that the visible, logical world of causation exists parallel to a spiritual reality. One of the first to make this argument was Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who argued that “primitive mentality” was characterized by a principle he called the “law of participation.” In this system of thought, there was no strict boundary between the natural and the supernatural worlds; supernatural reality was not devoid of logic but had its own form of it based on the association of things and ideas that would not be considered relational in a strictly rational model. Indeed, for Lévy-Bruhl, relationality—the interconnectiveness of all elements in the universe—was one of the touchstones of “primitive” mentality and “mystical thought” (Lévy-Bruhl, cited in Tambiah 1990, 21). Lévy-Bruhl was criticized for making too great a distinction between “primitive” and civilized societies, repeating the errors of the unilinear evolutionary anthropologists (Evans-Pritchard 1990, 91), so in his later work, he postulated that both “mystical thought” and rational-logical thought can coexist in any society. As Evans-Pritchard argued in his critique of Lévy-Bruhl, it is a case of multiple “levels of thought and experience” existing simultaneously within the same society (Evans-Pritchard 1990, 91).

A parallel idea is articulated by De Martino in *Sud e magia* (1987 [1966]), which traces the historical development of the evil eye and *jettatura* (intentional giving of the evil eye) in the Kingdom of Naples. According to De Martino, the concept of the evil eye permeates all aspects of Neapolitan society, from the lowest to the highest. Enlightenment and scientific concepts are layered on folk belief and practice to form a syncretic amalgam that attempts to rationalize this belief complex. Since among educated elites there is some embarrassment attached to belief in the evil eye, many articulate their belief accompanied by a self-disparaging irony (De Martino 1987, 176). Magic and rationality, then, are not opposites in Italian vernacular culture but exist side by side, in contrasting but overlapping realms of knowledge. I would argue that this continues to be the case in contemporary Italy as well as a number of other cultures. It is not that the enchanted worldview is an index of primitiveness and thus survives only in the countryside among culturally backward people, while educated and sophisticated urban dwellers cleave to a more rational standard. Rather, both worldviews exist side by side in the same society, only the enchanted worldview is more closely tied to specific social structures, economic systems, and ways of organizing labor and time. For this reason, it is easier to find in rural areas. Because it is relational, it is associated with systems in which landscape, time, labor, social relations, and religion are intimately interconnected and interdependent.



The enchanted worldview in rural Italy is rooted in specific premarket economic and social systems. It has persisted longest in marginal areas where small-scale agriculture and pastoralism continue to exist, often mixed with hunting and gathering as subsistence strategies. In these areas, the family remains the basic unit of social organization, but it is bolstered by the small face-to-face community—the town or village in which people know one another personally and have regular interactions. These communities are characterized by what sociologists call “dense” networks: people’s relationships to one another are characterized by multiple roles, including kinship, economic relationships, and relations of patronage.

Because of subsistence activities associated with the land, time is organized according to seasonal cycles; these are reflected in the ritual year, even when this is dominated by the Catholic liturgical rites. These are almost always locally interpreted in ways that connect them to the economic cycle: for example, in Campania, where wheat and hemp crops have been replaced by tobacco, which has a similar growing season, the ritual year begins near St. Martin in mid-November and extends until the end of the harvest season at St. Cosimo and Damiano in October. In pastoral areas such as Sardinia and the Apennine, May and September, the months that frame transhumance, are emphasized in local ritual practices. The exact shape of the ritual year thus differs markedly from one area to another. The symbols—the Madonnas and saints—are the same, but each township differs in the way it situates these characters within its symbolic and economic system. The enchanted worldview is not only rooted in the ritual year cycle; it also pervades the individual’s life cycle. It begins at birth and penetrates every phase of life and every rite of passage, from the moment of birth, when most Italian babies who are not born with a caul (*la camicia*, or “shirt,” in Italian) are given a lawn (finely woven cotton) shirt by a relative, often a godparent, to protect them against evil influences, to funerals, where a variety of beliefs about the otherworld are made manifest through practices.

The core of Italian vernacular religion is thus the correlation of its symbolic systems with *local* economic and social structures. The primary connection is never with the dominant structures of church and state. Hegemonic structures may or may not coincide with indigenous ones, but elements that do not match are simply ignored. As a result, the landscape of the enchanted worldview in Italy is everywhere local.

Despite its exquisitely local character, the enchanted worldview exists throughout Italy, in both northern and southern regions, with significantly more commonalities than one might think, given the differences in language, culture, and economy that characterize Italy’s twenty *regioni*. Certain concepts are ubiquitous: for example, the evil eye and its diagnosis and cures are found in all regions and are similar throughout. Yet the enchanted worldview defies systematization. Beliefs and practices are part of everyday life, part of praxis. German ethnologist Thomas Hauschild, who spent nearly twenty years studying Basilicata, a region in the south of Italy, wrote, “There is no system, only practice” (Hauschild 2003, 19). The practice *is* the system. Practice and belief, of course, exist within a particular cosmology, but their details seldom preoccupy its technologists. However, in some cases, individual practitioners and believers develop their own highly idiosyncratic systems



and cosmologies based on an array of vernacular beliefs, often combined with elements drawn from ecclesiastic or elite culture. At the same time, the enchanted worldview does not exist in isolation from dominant discourses. As Ernesto De Martino makes clear in *The Land of Remorse*, his epic study of tarantism, each successive layer of interpretation, from Christianity to Enlightenment paradigms, leaves a historic trace on magical traditions (De Martino 2005 [1961], 7), so that what Italian immigrants brought to North America, and what exists today in parts of Italy, is emphatically not a pagan religion but a syncretic layering of interpretations, superimpositions, and rationalizations on top of very ancient material. The modern Pagan revival and reclamation of these practices is merely the latest of a series of readings to which they have been subjected for millennia.

The main characteristic of the enchanted worldview is a belief in the omnipresence of spiritual beings that can influence human lives. These beings range from the dead to saints, the Virgin Mary and Jesus (who are, after all, nothing more than particularly powerful dead). Spirits are responsible for certain kinds of illnesses, although the type of spirit and the type of illness are generally determined by local lore. In Basilicata, the unquiet dead are said to cause skin diseases such as erysipelas and herpes zoster (St. Anthony's Fire); in Campania, children who fail to thrive are said to be taken by witches on their night flights and worn out with flying and dancing; in Emilia Romagna, Puglia, and Sardinia, spiders and insects are responsible for a range of illnesses from *tarantismo* to *argismo* to *arlia*. Some scholars suggest these insects actually embodied spirits who possess their victims through the bite or sting (De Martino 2005 [1961]; Gallini 1988).

Even spirits such as saints and the Madonna, who belong to a greater Catholic pantheon, are everywhere localized: the Madonna is usually worshipped in one or more of her local manifestations, and the devout have their personal favorites based on each Madonna's attributes and the qualities she "stands over," or rules, and their own individual needs or interests. For example, in Monghidoro, a town in the Bolognese Apennine, there are four principal local Madonnas, each with her own sanctuary in a different geographic location, each venerated at a different time of year, and each standing over a particular set of characteristics, from children and fertility to grief and death. In addition, a number of local springs are ruled over by a Madonna, as are certain trees and geographical boundaries. Informal shrines are erected at these locations, and the signs of ritual activity and veneration are omnipresent there: fresh flowers, photographs, and evidence of *ex votos* are found at these locations. Sometimes springs and trees may be associated with healing, and the shrines there may serve to activate or commemorate specific curative rituals, often consisting of prayers and pilgrimages.<sup>3</sup>

For many Italians living in rural areas, the world is permeated by the spirits of the dead. "The dead are everywhere," one informant told me; "in stones, in trees, in the earth. . . . You must learn that the dead are omnipresent" (interview with D. S., June 18, 2006). The dead are gone to us, their human relatives; but this does not mean they no longer exist. They manifest to us in small signs, which the living must learn to read and interpret. For example, Diana (a pseudonym), a forty-five-year-old woman in the Emilian Apennine who had lost a child, described how after his death, the area around the house and garden where he used to play was

filled with butterflies. She explained how, several months later, a particular type of blue flower sprang up in the garden spontaneously, where no one had planted it. In the same way, she said, when her neighbor had lost her daughter, pink flowers of the same type had appeared in her garden. Pink and blue are linked here to the gender of the dead children, but blue was significant to Diana because it was also her son's favorite color. She interpreted the presence of butterflies and the apparently spontaneous appearance of the flowers as signs of the continuing presence of the spirits of the dead children in the natural world.

The appearance of flowers as signs of the dead is idiosyncratic; but spirits can also manifest as animals traditionally associated with the dead. In the Apennine, these include butterflies,<sup>4</sup> moths, and other winged insects, white dogs,<sup>5</sup> snakes, and spiders. The last two in particular are associated in this region with an affliction known as *arlia*, in which adolescent girls or new mothers suddenly and inexplicably lose the ability to speak (Staro 2005).<sup>6</sup> Spirits of the dead interact with the living in a variety of ways, some helpful, some not. For example, they figure prominently as helpers of healers: one healer in the Apennine told me that the spirit of her uncle helps her to diagnose illness and that her father's spirit appeared to her when she was pregnant to reassure her that her child was a boy and would be born healthy (interview with T. D. E., June 17, 2006). This function has also been noted by numerous Italian ethnologists, for example De Martino (1987, 68–85ff.); Guggino (1997, 38–55ff.); Hauschild (2003, 294–310ff.). But the dead can also harm, “because evil spirits exist, too,” as one healer explained (cf. Guggino, *ibid.*; Hauschild, *ibid.*). She told me how her cousins had lived in a haunted mill that had once been a convent. A priest had trapped the ghosts in a container and had put a heavy stone on top to keep them in there, but when the stone was inadvertently removed, the spirits of the dead nuns returned to haunt the place (interview with T. D. E., June 17, 2006). In some regions of Italy, the restless dead are also thought to cause illness (Hauschild, 2003, 388–89; Guggino, 1993, 41–51ff.); living in a house that is disturbed by spirits, or even coming into contact with a ghost inadvertently, can lead to a series of consequences necessitating a spiritual cure and a visit to a cunning woman or man.

### The Italian Cunning Tradition

Everywhere in Italy, there are experts who specialize in interfacing with the enchanted world; much of their work consists in the diagnosis and cure of spiritual illness. Their names vary according to region; but they are never called “witches” except when speakers wish to disparage them. Instead, they are known as *guaritori* (healers), *donne che aiutano* (women who help), *praticos* (cunning folk), and occasionally *magò* or *maghiarja* (sorcerers; De Martino 1987; Berghameschi 1978; Romano 1987; Hauschild 2003; Guggino 1997). Healers are predominantly female, as this role is an extension of women's domestic role as nurturer (Lussu, in Bergameschi 1978); but male healers are not unheard of. There are two principal strains of healing in Italian vernacular culture: healing through the use of herbs and spiritual healing. In some cases, both may be practiced by the same individual.

Of the two, healing with herbs is considered less a matter of spiritual ability than of practical knowledge. Local plants are known as *erbe* (herbs) if they have useful or curative properties, even when they are in fact trees or shrubs. Plants with no medicinal or practical use are often not even named. Depending on their nature, plants may be pounded into a poultice, or dried and made into infusions or decoctions. Even in the use of herbs, there are those whose use borders on the magical. Near the Apennine town of Monghidoro, my informant Massimo and I took a long walk one afternoon during which he pointed out plants and explained their curative properties and modes of employ. Along the way, I sometimes pointed to plants and asked about their use. When I asked about mugwort, Massimo identified it (correctly) as an artemisia and indicated that it had a use, but for purposes that were not discussed—in other words, the plant was potentially harmful and associated with witchcraft.<sup>7</sup>

Spiritual healing, in contrast, is believed to be more connected with personal power. This is variously called *la forza* (power), *il dono* (the gift), or *la virtù* (virtue or attribute; Guggino 1997, 62; Hauschild 2003, 277). But power alone is useless without the prayers, magical formulas, and techniques that make up the cunning person's craft. Knowledge and power are passed on through an initiation, most commonly at midnight on Christmas Eve Mass, during the elevation of the host—that magical moment of transformation in the Catholic liturgical year at which the world is transformed by the birth of the Savior and the host is transformed into his body—and thus, by association, any transformation can take place. The knowledge takes the form of formulas that call upon a saint or the Madonna, and in some cases an accompanying technique that varies according to the nature of the spiritual cure. These formulas and techniques are secret; they cannot be passed on to others without the healer losing her or his power, and they can only be passed on at the appointed time in the ritual cycle. Often, this is the only initiation and training necessary for the transmission of simple charms. Healing knowledge and power are typically passed down within the family, though occasionally a nonfamily member may also receive the healing charms and prayers. In the case of more complex technologies, healers sometimes serve an apprenticeship with more experienced cunning folk. Ada (a pseudonym), a well-known healer who serves clients from Bologna, Florence and other cities, claimed that she had served seven years as the apprentice of a local *strega* (witch).<sup>8</sup>

Hauschild writes, “The *donne che aiutano* [women who help] are in constant duel with the dead” (Hauschild 2003, 242–43).<sup>9</sup> Magical tools are part of healers' craft, but these vary greatly from one healer to another; there is no standardization. Common tools include fiber ropes or cords to bind, knives or scissors to cut away illness, mirrors, and weapons to frighten away evil spirits. Guggino and Hauschild both describe how cunning folk from Sicily and Basilicata, respectively, keep ritual weapons on hand—ropes, daggers, scissors, swords, and rifles—to frighten away evil spirits that cause illness in their clients (Hauschild 2003, 253). These instruments recall the tools of modern Neo-Pagan Witches, whose altars, like those of vernacular healers, are places where the relationship to the spirit world is negotiated and maintained (Magliocco 2001b). Modern Pagan Witches may not use their sacred blades to frighten away the dead nor

their cords to bind them; but the parallels between the tools are striking. Additional tools may be created as part of healing spells: for example, charm bags to be worn upon the person as protective amulets. Italian healing traditions are largely oral, although some healers do possess notebooks of magical formulas, as cunning folk from other parts of Europe also did (Davies 2003; Hutton 1999, 90–95). Akin to medieval and early modern grimoires, these may be considered the precursors of modern Neo-Pagan books of shadows.<sup>10</sup>

The most widespread form of spiritual healing is the removal of the *malocchio*, or evil eye.<sup>11</sup> Particularly in the Campania, there was scarcely anyone I spoke with, even in casual social contexts, who did not name a mother, grandmother, or aunt who performed this kind of healing. In both Campania and Emilia, the removal of the evil eye typically took the form of dripping several drops of olive oil into a dish of water that had been placed on the patient's head. By observing whether the oil diffused into the water or floated on its surface, the healer diagnosed the presence or absence of the evil eye. She then said a silent prayer that would remove the ailment. When the oil began to coalesce and float on the water in discrete bubbles, this indicated that the healing had been successful and the evil eye had been removed. The prevalence of this form of vernacular magic, especially in Campania, is significant, because this region saw a very high rate of migration to North America during the years between 1890 and 1920. It may be that the descendants of these early immigrants can now look back and interpret this tradition, which is passed on in a hereditary fashion through a kind of initiation and involves practices that are certainly outside of official Catholicism, as evidence that their ancestors practiced a pagan religion.

The practice of *i segni*, or healing by the signs, is less widespread and requires more training. Besides prayer, the technique involves the movement of the hands over the affected part of the body in a clockwise manner. After several minutes of this, the healer moves her or his thumb vertically, then horizontally, tracing a series of crosses on the affected part. Some healers will use a sacred object, such as a small cross or religious medal, to sign; others combine *i segni* with massage using olive oil infused with herbs or with hot poultices made with herbs, cooked vegetable material, or salt. The use of the sign of the cross in the practice of signing strongly suggests its Christian origin (cf. Gay 2004), although it could also represent a Christianization of earlier practices.

More than the removal of the evil eye, signing involves close physical contact between the healer and the patient. Massimo, who heals with both traditional herbs and the signs, emphasized the importance of *disponibilità*, roughly translatable as openness to others, in the personality of the sign healer. During the period of my fieldwork, scarcely a night went by when someone did not come by Massimo's cottage to request a healing. Healing by the signs creates an intimacy between healer and client, since it involves close physical contact and can even serve to incorporate a newcomer into a community.<sup>12</sup> Sign healers are never paid for their work and must accept as a patient anyone who asks them for a healing.

In many areas, healing is essentially conceptualized as a battle against malevolent spirits—whether those of witches, the unquiet dead or others. Healers need spiritual allies in these battles, and many claim to regularly receive messages from

spirits who guide and help them in their craft. Many are highly localized as well as idiosyncratic: they may be saints, personal ancestors, or helpful dead. They appear to the healer in dreams and visions. Relationships with spirits, like human social relationships, are based on the principle of reciprocity, and healers maintain these relationships in a variety of ways. One of the most common is by keeping household or local shrines to the protective spirit. The image of the saint or departed loved one may be displayed in a prominent spot, such as a shelf or mantel, and flanked by votive candles, vases of flowers, and objects such as rosaries and sacred bric-a-brac that can be purchased in the gift shops of popular Roman Catholic sanctuaries. In the Emilian Apennine, shrines may also be found at specific outdoor locations: near springs and fountains, along footpaths, and at boundary markers. Often erected to commemorate a departed loved one, these shrines also act as memorials and serve as portals through which individuals communicate with the spirit world (Staro n.d.). Saints can act as powerful godparents, with all the ambivalence associated with that term. St. Paul, the protector of victims of tarantism, was perceived as both curing and on some level *causing* the ailment; while dancing in an ecstatic state, the afflicted reported alternately dialoguing with him and with the possessing *taranta* (spider), asking for healing; the husband of one *tarantata* told De Martino and his research team that the saint had actually sent the spider to bite his wife (De Martino 2005 [1961], 47).

Besides healers and magical practitioners, Italian rural society has a range of ritual specialists with very specific roles in their communities. Since relations with the spirit realm are partly governed by the ritual calendar and nearly all the occasions marked by the ritual calendar demand festivity, another layer of ritual specialists include those who organize festivals, maintain local shrines, or play music at religious festivals. These specialists may or may not overlap with those who dedicate themselves to ritual healing, but they constitute an important category that has often been overlooked by ethnographers but has received attention in the ethnomusicological literature (Gallini 1988; Del Giudice 2005; Magrini 2003; Staro 2005, n.d.).

### Witchcraft

In my own writings on Italian vernacular magic, I have consistently distinguished between actual local healers and magic workers, who could sometimes be accused of doing evil, and what I call the “folkloric witch,” an imaginary creature of legend whose activities—killing through magic, causing terrifying nightmares, flying through the air on broom straws, and dancing around the walnut tree of Benevento, to name just a few—could only take place in the realm of folk narrative. But this distinction is much easier to make on paper than in the minds and narratives of informants. It is clear from the oral narratives I collected that belief in witchcraft as *maleficum* still occurs occasionally in Italy. In one striking case, I was told that the tragic murder of a young man had been a result of witchcraft performed against a club of which he had been a member. The narrators claimed to have found evidence of magic hidden on the property where the club met.

These items were ritually disposed of, but a local unwitcher (a person specialized in undoing witchcraft) suggested that another club member was responsible for the actions. The suspected witch is none other than a local healer, albeit one who refers to herself openly as a *strega* (witch) and so perhaps attracts these kinds of accusations on some level. Thus, those who practice vernacular healing, cunning craft, and the removal of spells become easy suspects; when something goes wrong in the community, they are the first to be blamed.

Legends of witches working as part of a secret society are also alive and well in modern Italy. In Benevento, the legendary meeting place of witches, many people remembered very specific legends from their childhoods about witches who were well-known members of the community, and who, it was said, met secretly with other community members to work magic. Several described witchcraft to me as an initiatory organization that passed its secrets on only at Christmas during midnight Mass, just as the ability to heal is transmitted. Again, the threads linking the cunning tradition with beliefs about witches as harmful, yet hidden, community members are fine but present nonetheless. Here we are beginning to find some of the parameters that not only form a part of European witchcraft beliefs going back at least to the fourteenth century but are also part of the structure claimed by Italian American Streghe: witchcraft as a secret communal activity, handed down within families and through apprenticeships, much like cunning craft. I should emphasize that these links take the form of legend; there is little evidence that groups of healers or cunning folk participated in organized meetings and revels. Nevertheless, the widespread nature of these legends may be one reason the narratives of Leland and Grimassi find such resonance among Italian Americans today.

### Vernacular Healing and Witchcraft in the Italian American Diaspora

With the exception of research on the evil eye (Malpezzi and Clements 1992; Migliore 1997), surprisingly little inquiry has been done on vernacular healing and witchcraft beliefs among Italian Americans. A preliminary search in the Folklore Archives of the University of California, Berkeley has revealed a wealth of material, ranging from charms for warts and worms to narratives about intentionally placed curses. These materials were usually collected from individuals who were on the receiving end of the cures or who had heard about hexes, not from the charmers, healers and hexers themselves. Nothing I have found so far addresses the issue of the experience of vernacular religiosity, with its strong imaginal and spiritual components, which I hypothesize lies at the root of Stregheria. The archival materials are also plainly disconnected from their geographic, economic, and social links in Italy and inserted into an immigrant context in which the stigma against them is frequently mentioned. Clearly, much further research needs to be done to elucidate how Italian vernacular magicoreligious practices and experiences made the transition to the New World and the New Age.

## Conclusions

What can we conclude about the roots of Stregheria from these preliminary observations? I hypothesize that some Italian Americans who today see themselves as carriers of Stregheria grew up in families that preserved aspects of the enchanted worldview and the Italian cunning tradition. I hope that further research will substantiate more concrete links between the magicoreligious experiences of Italian immigrants and some aspects of vernacular magic that they are now reclaiming. Like modern Paganism and revival witchcraft, this way of life was organized around a ritual year that followed the cycle of the seasons; the moon and sun influenced rhythms of work and production. Women were recognized as life-givers and nourishers and were closely involved in the maintenance of shrines to a feminine divine figure, the Virgin Mary. Their immigrant ancestors may have been carriers of a tradition of healing that involved herbal and magical practices. Since these traditions could often be conflated with witchcraft in popular narratives, it is possible that this link persisted into the second, third, and fourth generation after immigration, giving contemporary Streghe the impression that their ancestors belonged to an organized, hierarchical but secret society of witches. Stregheria provides a framework into which these disparate, and by now decontextualized, beliefs and practices may be united and systematized. It revalues them as evidence of spiritual authenticity and continuity, transforming them into sources of ethnic pride and distinctiveness and creating new ways for Italian Americans to imagine themselves. As each successive generation interprets esoteric material according to the reigning dominant paradigms and predominant discourses of the time, the discourse of reclamation is itself but the latest of these to be layered upon this material.

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### Notes

1. In this chapter, I will capitalize Pagan, Witch, Witchcraft, and Stregheria when referring to the modern religions but use lowercase when using the terms in a historical or ethnographic context. Thus a witch or *strega* is a person believed to have the ability to harm others through supernatural means, while a Witch or *Strega* is the practitioner of a modern Pagan religion.
2. This area, however, saw comparatively little migration to North America. It was selected to test Leland's claims.
3. This observation comes from the author's fieldwork in the Emilian Apennine, 2005 and 2006.
4. This recalls the ancient Greek belief reflected in the dual meaning of the word *psyche* as both soul and butterfly.
5. This parallels associations in Celtic literature, in which white dogs with red ears were associated with the realm of the dead.
6. Cf. the association of spiders with *tarantismo* by De Martino (2005) and of winged antlike insects with the Sardinian *argismo* by Gallini (1988). Both scholars hypothesize that underneath these cures of medieval origin there may have been an earlier belief in the presence of spirits of the dead in insects and spiders.
7. Mugwort in fact possesses hallucinogenic properties and is toxic in large doses.
8. Her use of this term is unusual in that the majority of healers I interviewed did not refer to themselves or their teachers with this word, which has overwhelmingly negative connotations in Italian folk culture.
9. Translation by Consuelo Griggio-Kuhn; I am grateful to her for her invaluable help with the intricacies of Hauschild's text.
10. Grimoires are written collections of magical spells and formulas from European medieval and Renaissance practitioners. Many continued in existence well into the nineteenth century. Modern Pagan books of shadows are also written collections of rites and spells, either held individually or, in the case of specific traditions, shared by a coven or an entire tradition (e.g., Gardnerian and Alexandrian Witchcraft traditions).
11. The evil eye has been the object of extensive study in the ethnology of the Mediterranean. For a preliminary overview, see Dundes 1980, 1981; Elworthy 1986; Di Stasi 1981.
12. When I was in Monghidoro in 2005, I suffered one of the worst attacks of sciatica I have ever experienced, probably due to dragging around a suitcase full of books and photographic equipment. I was worked on by two different healers, Massimo and Tina; my willingness to be worked on, to enter into the system that I was observing, may have hastened the formation of rapport with the social group I was observing.

